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POLITE FARCES

By the same Author.

A MAN FROM THE NORTH : A Novel.
JOURNALISM FOR WOMEN.

POLITE FARCES

For the Drawing-room

BY

E. A. BENNETT



LONDON

LAMLEY AND CO.

1900

TO

F. C. B.

MY BROTHER AND COLLEAGUE.

NOTE

THE three farces comprising the present book have been written for drawing-room performance. Dumas *père*, the father of modern drama, once said that all he needed was "four trestles, four boards, two actors, and a passion." For myself, I have dispensed with the trestles, the boards, and the passion, since none of these things is suitable for a drawing-room. The only apparatus necessary to the presentation of the pieces is ordinary costume, ordinary furniture, and a single door for entrance and exit.

E. A. B.

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The Stepmother

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

CORA PROUT (*a popular novelist and a widow, 30*).

ADRIAN PROUT (*her stepson, 20*).

THOMAS GARDNER (*a doctor, 35*).

CHRISTINE FEVERSHAM (*Mrs. Prout's secretary, 20*).

SCENE.—*Mrs. Prout's study : luxuriously furnished ; large table in centre, upon which are a new novel, press-cuttings, and the usual apparatus of literary composition.*

[Christine is seated at the large table, ready for work, and awaiting the advent of Mrs. Prout. To pass the time she picks up the novel, the leaves of which are not cut, and glances at a page here and there. Enter Mrs. Prout, hurried and preoccupied ; the famous novelist is attired in a plain morning gown, which in the perfection of its cut displays the beauty of her figure. She nods absently to Christine, and sits down in an armchair away from the table.]

CHRISTINE

Good morning, Mrs. Prout. I'm afraid you are still sleeping badly.

MRS. PROUT

Do I look it, girl ?

CHRISTINE

You don't specially look it, Mrs. Prout. But I observe. You are my third novelist, and they have all taught me to observe. Before I took up novelists I was with a

Member of Parliament, and he never observed anything except five-line whips.

MRS. PROUT

Really! Five-line whips! Oblige me by putting that down in Notebook No. 2. There will be an M.P. in that wretched thirty-thousand word thing I've promised for the Christmas number of the *New York Surpriser* and it might be useful. I might even make an epigram out of it.

CHRISTINE

Yes, Mrs. Prout [*writes*].

MRS. PROUT

And what are your observations about me?

CHRISTINE

[*while writing*] Well, this is twice in three weeks that you've been here five minutes late in the morning.

MRS. PROUT

Is that all? You don't think my stuff's falling off?

CHRISTINE

Oh *no*, Mrs. Prout! I *know* it's not falling off. I was just going to tell you. The butler's been in, and wished me to inform you that he begged to give notice [*looking up*]. It seems that last night you ordered him to cut the leaves of our new novel [*patting book maternally*]. He said he just looked into it, and he thinks it's disgraceful to ask a respectable

butler to cut the leaves of such a book. So he begs to give warning. Oh no, Mrs. Prout, your stuff isn't falling off.

MRS. PROUT

[grimly] What did you say to him, girl?

CHRISTINE

First I looked at him, and then I said, "Brown, you will probably be able to get a place on the reviewing staff of *The Methodist Recorder*."

MRS. PROUT

Christine, one day, I really believe, you will come to employ a secretary of your own.

CHRISTINE

I hope so, Mrs. Prout. But I intend to keep off the morbid introspection line. *You* do that so awfully well. I think I shall go in for smart dialogue, with marquises and country houses, and a touch of old-fashioned human nature at the bottom. It appears to me that's what's coming along very shortly. . . . Shall we begin, Mrs. Prout?

MRS. PROUT

[disinclined] Yes, I suppose so [clearing her throat]. By the way, anything special in the press-cuttings?

CHRISTINE

Nothing very special [*fingering the pile of press-cuttings*]. The *Morning Call* says, "genius in every line."

MRS. PROUT

[*blasé*] Hum !

CHRISTINE

The *Daily Reporter* : "Cora Prout may be talented—we should hesitate to deny it—but she is one of several of our leading novelists who should send themselves to a Board School in order to learn grammar."

MRS. PROUT

Grammar again ! They must keep a grammar in the office ! Personally I think it's frightfully bad form to talk about grammar to a lady. But they never had any taste at the *Reporter*. Don't read me any more. Let us commence work.

CHRISTINE

Which will you do, Mrs. Prout ? [*consulting a diary of engagements.*] There's the short story for the *Illustrated Monthly*, six thousand, promised for next Saturday. There's the article on "Women's Diversions" for the *British Review*—they wrote for that yesterday. There's the serial that begins in the *Sunday Daily Sentinel* in September—you've only done half the first instalment of that. And of course there's *Heart Ache*.

MRS. PROUT

I think I'll go on with *Heart Ache*. I feel it coming. I'll do the short story for the *Illustrated* to-morrow. Where had I got to ?

CHRISTINE

[*choosing the correct notebook, reads*] "The inanimate form of the patient lay like marble on the marble slab of the operating-table. 'The sponge, Nurse,' said the doctor, 'where is it?'" That's where you'd got to.

MRS. PROUT

Yes. I remember. New line. "Isabel gazed at him imperturbably." New line. Quote-marks. "'I fear, Doctor,' she remarked, 'that in a moment of forgetfulness you have sewn it up in our poor patient.'" New line. Quote-marks. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have.'" Rather good, that, Christine, eh? [*Christine writes in shorthand.*]

CHRISTINE

Oh, Mrs. Prout, I think it's beautiful. So staccato and crisp. By the way, I forgot to tell you that there's a leader in the *Daily Snail* on that frightful anonymous attack in the *Forum* against your medical accuracy [*looking at Mrs. Prout, who is silent, but shows signs of agitation*]. You remember—"Medicine in Fiction." The *Snail* backs up the *Forum* for all it's worth. . . . Mrs. Prout, you *are* ill. I was sure you were. What can I get for you?

MRS. PROUT

[*weakly wiping her eyes*] Nonsense, Chris-

tine. I am a little unstrung, that is all. I want nothing.

CHRISTINE

Your imagination is too much for you.

MRS. PROUT

[*meekly*] Perhaps so.

CHRISTINE

[*firmly*] But it isn't all due to an abnormal imagination. You've never been quite cheerful since you turned Mr. Adrian out.

MRS. PROUT

You forget yourself, Christine.

CHRISTINE

I forget nothing, Mrs. Prout, myself least of all. Mr. Adrian is your dead husband's son, and you turned him out of your house, and now you're sorry.

MRS. PROUT

Christine, you know perfectly well that I—er—requested him to go because he would insist on making love to you, which interfered with our work. Besides, it was not quite nice for a man to make love to the secretary of his stepmother. I wonder you are indelicate enough to refer to the matter. You should never have permitted his advances.

CHRISTINE

I didn't permit them. I wasn't asked to. I tolerated them. I hadn't been secretary to

a lady-novelist with a stepson before, and I wasn't quite sure what was included in the duties. I always like to give satisfaction.

MRS. PROUT

You do give satisfaction. Let that end the discussion.

CHRISTINE

[*pouting; turning to her notebook; reads*]
“ ‘Damn!’ said the doctor, ‘so I have’ ”
[*pause*]. “ ‘Damn!’ said the doctor, ‘so I have’ ” [*pause*].

MRS. PROUT

Christine, did you find out who was the author of that article on “Medicine in Fiction”?

CHRISTINE

Is *that* what's bothering you, Mrs. Prout? Of course it was a nasty attack, but it is very unlike you to trouble about critics.

MRS. PROUT

It has hurt me more than I can say. That was why I asked you to make a few discreet inquiries.

CHRISTINE

I did ask at my club.

MRS. PROUT

And what did they think there?

CHRISTINE

They laughed at me, and said every one knew you had written it yourself just to keep

the silly season alive, July being a sickly month for reputations.

MRS. PROUT

What did you say to that?

CHRISTINE

I should prefer not to repeat it.

MRS. PROUT

Christine, I insist. Your modesty is becoming a disease.

CHRISTINE

I said they were fools——

MRS. PROUT

A little abrupt, perhaps, but effective.

CHRISTINE

—Not to see that the grammar was different from ours.

MRS. PROUT

Oh! that was what you said, was it?

CHRISTINE

It was, and it settled them.

MRS. PROUT

[*assuming a confidential air*] Christine, I believe I know who wrote that article.

CHRISTINE

Who?

MRS. PROUT

Dr. Gardner [*bursts into tears*].

CHRISTINE

[*soothing her*] But he lives on the floor below, in the very flat underneath this.

MRS. PROUT

[*choking back her sobs*] Yes. It is too dreadful.

CHRISTINE

But he comes here nearly every evening.

MRS. PROUT

[*sharply*] Who told you that?

CHRISTINE

Now, Mrs. Prout, let me implore you to be calm. The butler told me. I didn't ask him, and as I cannot be expected to foretell what my employer's butler will say before he opens his mouth, I am not to blame [*compresses her lips*]. Shall we continue?

MRS. PROUT

Christine, do you think it was Dr. Gardner?

I would give worlds to know.

CHRISTINE

[*coldly analytic*] Do you mean that you would give worlds to know that it was Dr. Gardner, or that it wasn't Dr. Gardner? Or would give worlds merely to know the author's name—no matter who he might be?

MRS. PROUT

[*sighing*] You are dreadfully unsympathetic this morning.

CHRISTINE

I am placid, nothing else. Please recollect that when you engaged me you asked if you

might rely on me to be placid, as your previous secretary, when you dictated the pathetic chapters, had wept so freely into her notebook that she couldn't transcribe her stuff, besides permanently injuring her eyesight. Since you ask my opinion as to Dr. Gardner being the author of this attack on you, I say that he isn't. Apart from the facts that he lives on the floor below, and that he is, so the butler says, a constant visitor in the evenings, there is the additional fact—a fact which I have several times observed for myself without the assistance of the butler—that he likes you.

MRS. PROUT

You have noticed that. It is true. But the question is : Does he like me sufficiently not to attack my work in the public press ? That is the point. The writer of that cruel article begins by saying that he has no personal animus, and that he is actuated solely by an enthusiasm for the cause of medicine and the medical profession.

CHRISTINE

You mean to infer, Mrs. Prout, that the author of the article might, as a man, like you, while as a doctor he despised you ?

MRS. PROUT

[*whimpering again*] That is my suspicion.

CHRISTINE

But Dr. Gardner does more than like you.
He adores you.

MRS. PROUT

He adores my talent, my genius, my fame,
my wealth ; but does he adore *me* ? I am
not an ordinary woman, and it is no use pre-
tending that I am. I must think of these
things.

CHRISTINE

Neither is Dr. Gardner an ordinary doctor.
His researches into toxicology——

MRS. PROUT

His researches are nothing to me. I wish
he wasn't a doctor at all.

CHRISTINE

Even doctors have their place in the world,
Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT

They should not meddle with fiction,
poking their noses——

CHRISTINE

But if fiction meddles with *them* ? . . . You
know fiction is really very meddlesome. It
pokes its nose with great industry.

MRS. PROUT

[*pulling herself together*] Christine, you
have never understood me. Let us continue.

CHRISTINE

[*with an offended air, turning once more to*

her notebook] “ ‘Damn !’ said the doctor, ‘so I have.’ ”

MRS. PROUT

[*coughing*] New line. “A smile flashed across the lips of Isabel as she took up a glittering knife——” [*gives a great sob*]. Oh, Christine ! I’m sure Dr. Gardner wrote it.

CHRISTINE

Very well, madam. He wrote it. We have at last settled something. [*Mrs. Prout buries her face in her hands. Christine looks up, and after an instant’s pause springs towards her*] You poor dear ! You are perfectly hysterical this morning. You must go and lie down for a little. A horizontal posture is what you need.

MRS. PROUT

Perhaps you are right. I will leave you for an hour [*litters to her feet*]. Take down this note for Dr. Gardner. He may call this morning. In fact, I rather think he will. “The answer to the question is ‘No’ ”—capital N.

CHRISTINE

Shall I sign it ?

MRS. PROUT

Yes ; sign it “C. P.” And if he comes, give it him yourself, and say that I can see no one. And, Christine, would you mind [*crying gently again*] seeing the b-b-butler,

and try to reason him into a sensible attitude towards my n-n-novels. In my present state of health I couldn't stand any change. And he is so admirable at table.

CHRISTINE

Shall I offer some compromise in our next novel? I might inquire what is the irreducible minimum of his demands.

MRS. PROUT

[*faintly*] Anything, anything, if he will stay.

CHRISTINE

[*following Mrs. Prout to the door, and louching her shoulder caressingly*] Try to sleep.

[*Exit Mrs. Prout.*]

[*Christine whistles in a low tone as she returns meditatively to her seat.*]

CHRISTINE

[*looking at notebook*] "Isabel took up a glittering knife," did she? "The answer to the question is 'No,'" with a capital N. "C. P." sounds like Carter Paterson. Now, as I have nothing to do, I think I will devote the morning to an article on "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." Um! Ah! "The answer to the question is 'No'"—capital N. What question? Can it be that the lily-white hand of the author of *Heart-Ache* has . . . [*knock*] Come in.

Enter Dr. Gardner.

GARDNER

Oh, good morning, Miss Feversham.

CHRISTINE

Good morning, Dr. Gardner. You seem surprised to see me here. Yet I am to be found in this chair daily at this hour.

GARDNER

Not at all, not at all. I assure you I fully expected to find both you and the chair. I also expected to find Mrs. Prout.

CHRISTINE

Are you capable of interrupting our literary labours? We do not receive callers so early, Dr. Gardner. Which reminds that I have several times remarked that this study ought not to have a door opening into the corridor.

GARDNER

As for that, may I venture to offer the excuse that I had an appointment with Mrs. Prout?

CHRISTINE

At what hour? She never makes appointments before noon.

GARDNER

I believe she did say twelve o'clock.

CHRISTINE

[*looking at her watch*] And it is now twenty-five minutes to ten. Punctuality is a virtue.

You may be said to have raised it to the dignity of a fine art.

GARDNER

I will wait [*sits down*]. I trust I do not interrupt?

CHRISTINE

Yes, Doctor, I regret to say that you do. I was about to commence the composition of an article.

GARDNER

Upon what?

CHRISTINE

Upon "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." It is my speciality.

GARDNER

Surely lady novelists are not hysterical?

CHRISTINE

The increase of hysteria among that class of persons is one of the saddest features of the age.

GARDNER

Dear me! [*enthusiastically*] But I can tell you the name of one lady novelist who isn't hysterical—and that, perhaps, the greatest name of all—Mrs. Prout.

CHRISTINE

Of course not, of course not, Doctor. Nevertheless, Mrs. Prout is somewhat indisposed this morning.

GARDNER

Cora—ill! What is it? Nothing serious?

CHRISTINE

Rest assured. The merest slight indisposition. Just sufficient to delay us an hour or two with our work. Nothing more. Nerves, you know. The imagination of a great artist, Dr. Gardner, is often too active, too stressful, for the frail physical organism.

GARDNER

Ah! You regard Mrs. Prout as a great artist?

CHRISTINE

Doctor—even to ask such a question . . . !
Do not you?

GARDNER

I? To me she is unique. I say, Miss Feversham, were you ever in love?

CHRISTINE

In love? I have had preferences.

GARDNER

Among men?

CHRISTINE

No; among boys. Recollect I am only twenty, though singularly precocious in shrewdness and calm judgment.

GARDNER

Twenty? You amaze me, Miss Feversham. I have often been struck by your common sense and knowledge of the world. They would do credit to a woman of fifty.

CHRISTINE

I am glad to notice that you do not stoop to offer me vulgar compliments about my face.

GARDNER

I am incapable of such conduct. I esteem your mental qualities too highly. And so you have had your preferences among boys?

CHRISTINE

Yes, I like to catch them from eighteen to twenty. They are so sweet and fresh then, like new milk. The *employé* of the Express Dairy Company who leaves me my half-pint at my lodgings each morning is a perfectly lovely dear. I adore him.

GARDNER

He is one of your preferences, then?

CHRISTINE

A preference among milkmen, of whom, as I change my lodgings frequently, I have known many. Then there is the postman—not a day more than eighteen, I am sure, though that is contrary to the regulations at St. Martin's-le-Grand. Dr. Gardner, you *should* see my postman. When *he* brings them I can receive even rejected articles with equanimity.

GARDNER

I should be charmed to see him. But tell me, Miss Feversham, have you had no serious preferences?

CHRISTINE

You seem interested in this question of preferences.

GARDNER

I am.

CHRISTINE

Doctor, I will open my heart to you. It is conceivable you may be of use to me. You are on friendly terms with Adrian, and doubtless you know the history of his exit from this house. [GARDNER *nods, with a smile.*] Doctor, he and I are passionately attached to each other. Our ages are precisely alike. It is a beautiful idyll, or rather it would be, if dear Mrs. Prout did not try to transform it into a tragedy. She has not only turned the darling boy out, but she has absolutely forbidden him the house.

GARDNER

Doubtless she had her reasons.

CHRISTINE

Oh, I'm *sure* she had. Only, you see, her reasons aren't ours. Of course we could marry at once if we chose. I could easily keep Adrian. I do not, however, wish to inconvenience dear Mrs. Prout. It is a mistake to quarrel with the rich relations of one's future husband. But I was thinking that perhaps you, Doctor, might persuade dear Mrs. Prout that my marriage to Adrian need

not necessarily interfere with the performance of my duties as her secretary.

GARDNER

Anything that I can do, Miss Feversham, you may rely on me doing.

CHRISTINE

You are a dear.

GARDNER

But why should you imagine that I have any influence with Mrs. Prout ?

CHRISTINE

I do not imagine ; I know. It is my unerring insight over again, my faultless observation. Doctor, you did not begin to question me about love because you were interested in *my* love affairs, but because you were interested in your own, and couldn't keep off the subject. I read you like a book. You love Mrs. Prout, my dear Doctor. Therefore you have influence over her. No woman is uninfluenced by the man who loves her.

GARDNER

[*laughing between self-satisfaction and self-consciousness*] You have noticed that I admire Mrs. Prout ? It appears that nothing escapes you.

CHRISTINE

That is a trifle. The butler has noticed it.

ARDNER

The butler !

CHRISTINE

The butler.

GARDNER

[*with abandon*] Let him. Let the whole world notice. Miss Feversham, be it known that I love Mrs. Prout with passionate adoration. Before the day is out I shall either be her affianced bridegroom—or I shall be a dead man.

CHRISTINE

[*leaning forward ; in a low, tense voice*] You proposed to her last night ?

GARDNER

I did.

CHRISTINE

And you were to come for the answer this morning ?

GARDNER

Yes. Can you not guess that I am eager—excited ? Can you not pardon me for thinking it is noon at twenty-five minutes to ten ? Ah, Miss Feversham, if Adrian adores you with one-tenth of the fire with which I adore Mrs. Prout——

CHRISTINE

Stop, Doctor. I do not wish to be a burnt sacrifice. Now let me ask you a question. You have seen that attack on Mrs. Prout, entitled "Medicine in Fiction," in this month's *Forum*. Do you know the author of it ?

GARDNER

I don't. Has it disturbed Mrs. Prout?

CHRISTINE

It has. Did she not mention it to you?

GARDNER

Not a word. If I did know the author of it, if I ever do know the author of it, I will tear him [*fiercely*] limb from limb.

CHRISTINE

I trust you will chloroform him first. It will be horrid of you if you don't.

GARDNER

I absolutely decline to chloroform him first.

CHRISTINE

You must.

GARDNER

I won't.

CHRISTINE

Never mind. Perhaps you will be dead. Remember that you have promised to kill yourself to-day on a certain contingency. Should you really do it? Should you really put an end to your life if Mrs. Prout gave you a refusal?

GARDNER

I swear it. Existence would be valueless to me.

CHRISTINE

By the way, Mrs. Prout told me that if you called I was to say that she could see no one.

GARDNER

See no one ! But she promised . . .

CHRISTINE

However, she left a note.

GARDNER

[*starting up*] Give it me instantly. Why didn't you give it me before ?

CHRISTINE

I had no opportunity. Besides, I haven't transcribed it yet It was dictated.

GARDNER

Dictated ? Are you sure ?

CHRISTINE

[*seriously*] Oh yes, she dictates *everything*.

GARDNER

Well, well, read it to me, read it to me. Quick, I say.

CHRISTINE

[*turning over leaves rapidly*] Here it is. Are you listening ?

GARDNER

Great Heaven !

CHRISTINE

[*reads from her shorthand note*] "The answer to your question is——"

GARDNER

Go on.

CHRISTINE

[*drawing her breath first*] "Yes.—C. P." There ! I've saved your life for you.

GARDNER

You have indeed, my dear girl. But I must see her. I must see my beloved Cora.

CHRISTINE

[*taking his hand*] Accept my advice, Doctor—the advice of a simple, artless girl. Do not attempt to see her to-day. There are seasons of emotion when a woman [*stops*]. . . . Go downstairs and write to her, and then give the letter to me. [*Pats him on the back.*]

GARDNER

I will, by Jove. Miss Feversham, you're a good sort. And as you've told me something, I'll tell you something. Adrian is going to storm the castle to-day.

CHRISTINE

Adrian! [*A knock.*]

Enter Adrian.

ADRIAN

Since you command it, I enter.

GARDNER

Let me pass, bold youth.

[*Exit Dr. Gardner hurriedly.*]

ADRIAN

[*overcome by Gardner's haste*] Why this avalanche? Has something happened suddenly?

CHRISTINE

Several things have happened suddenly,

Adrian, and several more will probably happen when your mamma discovers that you are defying her orders in this audacious manner. Why are you here? [*Kisses him.*] You perfect duck!

ADRIAN

[*gravely*] I am not here, Miss Feversham——

CHRISTINE

“Miss Feversham”—and my kiss still warm on his lips!

ADRIAN

I repeat, Miss Feversham, that I am not here. This [*pointing to himself*] is not I. It is merely a rather smart member of the staff of the *Daily Snail*, come to interview Cora Prout, the celebrated novelist.

CHRISTINE

And I have kissed a *Snail* reporter. Ugh!

ADRIAN

Impetuosity has ruined many women.

CHRISTINE

It is a morning of calamities [*assuming the secretarial pose*]. Your card, please.

ADRIAN

[*handing card*] With pleasure.

CHRISTINE

[*taking card by the extreme corner, perusing it with disdain, and then dropping it on the floor*]
We never see interviewers in the morning.

ADRIAN

Then I will call this afternoon.

CHRISTINE

You must write for an appointment.

ADRIAN

Oh ! I'll take my chances, thanks.

CHRISTINE

We never give them : it is our rule. We have to be very particular. The fact is, we hate being interviewed, and we only submit to the process out of a respectful regard for the great and enlightened public. Any sort of notoriety, any suggestion of self-advertisement, is distasteful to us. What do you wish to interview us about ? If it's the new novel, we are absolutely mum. Accept that from me.

ADRIAN

It isn't the new novel. The *Snail* wishes to know whether Mrs. Prout feels inclined to make any statement in reply to that article, "Medicine in Fiction," in the *Forum*.

CHRISTINE

Oh, Adrian, do you know anything about that article ?

ADRIAN

Rather ! I know *all* about it.

CHRISTINE

You treasure ! You invaluable darling ! I will marry you to-morrow morning by special licence——

ADRIAN

Recollect, it is a *Snail* reporter whom you are addressing. Suppose I were to print that !

CHRISTINE

Just so. You are prudence itself, while I, for the moment, happen to be a little—a little abnormal. I saved a man's life this morning, and it is apt to upset one's nerves. It is a dreadful thing to do—to save a man's life. And the consequences will be simply frightful for me [*buries her face in her hands*].

ADRIAN

Christine [*taking her hands*], what are you raving about ? You are not yourself.

CHRISTINE

I wish I wasn't [*looking up with forced calm*]. Adrian, there is a possibility of your being able to save me from the results of my horrible act, if only you will tell me the name of the author of that article in the *Forum*.

ADRIAN

[*tenderly*] Christine, you little know what you ask. But for you I will do anything. . . . Kiss me, my white lily. [*She kisses him*]

CHRISTINE

[*whispers*] Tell me. [*He folds her up in his arms*]

Enter Mrs. Prout excitedly.

MRS. PROUT

[as she enters] Christine, that appalling butler has actually left the house . . . *[observing group]* Heavens !

CHRISTINE

[quietly disengaging herself] You seem a little better, Mrs. Prout. A person to interview you from the *Daily Snail* *[pointing to Adrian]*.

MRS. PROUT

Adrian !

ADRIAN

Yes, mamma.

MRS. PROUT

[opening her lips to speak and then closing them] Sit down.

ADRIAN

Certainly, mamma *[sits]*.

MRS. PROUT

How dare you come here ?

ADRIAN

I don't know how, mamma *[picks up his card from the floor and hands it to her ; then resumes his seat]*.

MRS. PROUT

[glancing at card] Pah !

CHRISTINE

That's just what I told the person, Mrs. Prout.
[Mrs. Prout burns her up with a glance.]

MRS. PROUT

You have, then, abandoned your medical studies, for which I had paid all the fees?

ADRIAN

Yes, mamma. You see, I was obliged to earn something at once. So I took to journalism. I am getting on quite nicely. The editor of the *Snail* says that I may review your next book.

MRS. PROUT

Unnatural stepson, to review in cold blood the novel of your own stepmother! But this morning I am getting used to misfortunes.

ADRIAN

It cuts me to the heart to hear you refer to any action of mine as a misfortune for you. Perhaps you would prefer that I should at once relieve you of my presence?

MRS. PROUT

Decidedly yes—that is, if Christine thinks she can do without the fifth act of that caress which I interrupted.

CHRISTINE

The curtain was already falling, madam.

MRS. PROUT

Very well. [*To Adrian*] Good-day.

ADRIAN

As a stepson I retire. As the “special” of the *Daily Snail* I must insist on remaining. A “special” of the *Daily Snail* is incapable of

being snubbed. He knows what he wants, and he gets it, or he ceases to be a "special" of the *Daily Snail*.

MRS. PROUT

I esteem the press, and though I should prefer an existence of absolute privacy, I never refuse its demands. I sacrifice myself to my public, freely acknowledging that a great artist has no exclusive right to the details of his own daily life. A great artist belongs to the world. What is it you want, Mr. Snail?

ADRIAN

I want to know whether you care to say anything in reply to that article on "Medicine in Fiction" in the *Forum*.

MRS. PROUT

[*sinking back in despair*] That article again!
[*sitting up*] Tell me—do you know the author?

ADRIAN

I do.

MRS. PROUT

His name!

ADRIAN

He is a friend of mine.

MRS. PROUT

His name!

ADRIAN

I am informed that in writing it he was

actuated by the highest motives. His desire was not only to make a little money, but to revenge himself against a person who had deeply injured him. He didn't know much about medicine, being only a student, and probably the larger part of his arguments could not be sustained, but he knew enough to make a show, and he made it.

MRS. PROUT

His name ! I insist.

ADRIAN

Adrian Spout or Prout—I have a poor memory. . . .

MRS. PROUT

Is it possible ?

CHRISTINE

Monster !

ADRIAN

Need I defend myself, mamma ? Consider what you had done to me. You had devastated my young heart, which was just unfolding to its first passion. You had blighted the springtime of the exquisite creature [*looking at Christine, who is moved by the feeling in his tones*]*—the exquisite creature who was dearer to me than all the world. In place of the luxury of my late father's house you offered me—the street. . . .*

CHRISTINE

Yes . . . and Gower Street.

ADRIAN

You, who should have gently fostered and encouraged the frail buds of my energy and intelligence—you cast me forth . . .

CHRISTINE

Cast *them* forth.

ADRIAN

Cast *them* forth, untimely plucked, to wither, and perhaps die, in the deserts of a great city. And for what? For what?

CHRISTINE

Merely lest she should be deprived of *my* poor services. Ah! Mrs Prout, can you wonder that Mr. Adrian should actively resent such conduct—you with your marvellous knowledge of human nature?

MRS. PROUT

Adrian, did you really write it?

ADRIAN

Why, of course. You seem rather pleased than otherwise, mamma.

MRS. PROUT

[*after cogitating*] Ah! You didn't write it, really. You are just boasting. It is a plot, a plot!

ADRIAN

I can prove that I wrote it, since you impugn my veracity.

MRS. PROUT

How can you prove it?

ADRIAN

By producing the cheque which I received from the *Forum* this very morning.

MRS. PROUT

Produce it, and I will forgive all.

ADRIAN

[*with a sign to Christine that he entirely fails to comprehend the situation*] I fly. It is in my humble attic, round the corner. Back in two minutes. [Exit Adrian.]

MRS. PROUT

Christine, *did* he really write it?

CHRISTINE

Can you doubt his word? Was it for lying that you ejected the poor youth from this residence?

MRS. PROUT

Ah! If he did! [*smiles*] Of course Dr. Gardner has not called?

CHRISTINE

Yes, he was in about twenty minutes ago.

MRS. PROUT

[*agonised*] Did you give him my note?

CHRISTINE

No.

MRS. PROUT

Thank Heaven!

CHRISTINE

I had not copied it out, so I read it to him.

MRS. PROUT

You read it to him ?

CHRISTINE

Yes ; that seemed the obvious thing to do.

MRS. PROUT

[in black despair] All is over *[sinks back]*.

Enter Dr. Gardner hastily.

CHRISTINE

Again ?

GARDNER

[excited] I was looking out of the window of my flat when I saw Adrian tear along the street. I said to myself, "A man, even a reporter, only runs like that when a doctor is required, and urgently required. Some one is ill, perhaps my darling Cora." So I flew upstairs.

MRS. PROUT

[with a shriek] Dr. Gardner !

GARDNER

You *are* indeed ill, my beloved *[approaching her]*. What is the matter ?

MRS. PROUT

[waving him off] It is nothing, Doctor. Could you get me some salts ? I have mislaid mine *[sighs]*.

GARDNER

Salts ! In an instant. *[Exit Dr. Gardner.*

MRS. PROUT

Christine, you said you read my note to Dr. Gardner.

CHRISTINE

Yes, Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT

His behaviour is singular in the extreme. He seems positively overjoyed, while the freedom of his endearing epithets—— What were the precise terms I used? Read me the note.

CHRISTINE

Yes, Mrs. Prout. [*reads demurely*] “The answer to your question is ‘Yes,’”—with a capital N.

MRS. PROUT

“Yes” with a capital N?

CHRISTINE

[*calmly*] I mean with a capital Y.

[*Christine and Mrs. Prout look steadily at each other. Then they both smile*]

Enter Dr. Gardner.

GARDNER

[*handing the salts*] You are sure you are not ill?

MRS. PROUT

[*smiling at him radiantly*] I am convinced of it. Christine, will you kindly reach me down the dictionary from that shelf?

[While Christine's back is turned Dr. Gardner gives, and Mrs. Prout returns, a passionate kiss]

CHRISTINE

[handing dictionary] Here it is, Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT

[after consulting it] I thought I could not be mistaken. Christine, you have rendered me a service [regarding her affectionately]—a service for which I shall not forget to express my gratitude ; but I am obliged to dismiss you instantly from my service.

CHRISTINE

Dismiss me, madam ?

GARDNER

Cora, can you be so cruel ?

MRS. PROUT

Alas, yes ! She has sinned the secretarial sin which is beyond forgiveness. She has misspelt.

GARDNER

Impossible !

MRS. PROUT

It is too true.

GARDNER

Tell me the sad details.

MRS. PROUT

She has been guilty of spelling " No " with a " Y."

GARDNER

Dear me ! And a word of one syllable, too !

Miss Feversham, I should not have thought it of you.

Enter Adrian.

ADRIAN

[*as he hands a cheque for Mrs. Prout's inspection*] Here again, Doctor?

GARDNER

Yes, and to stay.

MRS. PROUT

Adrian, the Doctor and I are engaged to be married. And talking of marriage, you observe that girl there in the corner. Take her and marry her at the earliest convenient moment. She is no longer my secretary.

ADRIAN

What! You consent?

MRS. PROUT

I consent.

ADRIAN

And you pardon my article?

MRS. PROUT

No, my dear Adrian, I ignore it. Here, take your ill-gotten gains [*returning cheque*]. They will bring you no good. And since they will bring you no good, I have decided to allow you the sum of five hundred pounds a year. You must have something.

ADRIAN

Stepmother!

CHRISTINE

[*advancing to take Mrs. Prout's hand*]
Stepmother-in-law !

GARDNER

Cora, you are an angel.

MRS. PROUT

Merely an artist, my dear Tom, merely an artist. I have the dramatic sense—that is all.

ADRIAN

Your sense is more than dramatic, it is common ; it is even horse. What about the *Snail* "special," mummy ?

MRS. PROUT

My attitude is one of strict silence.

ADRIAN

But I must go away with something.

MRS. PROUT

Strict silence. The attack is beneath my notice.

ADRIAN

But what can I *say* ?

CHRISTINE

Say that Mrs. Prout's late secretary, Miss Feversham, having retired from her post, has already entered upon a career of original literary composition. That will be a nice newsy item, won't it ?

ADRIAN

[*taking out notebook*] Rather ! What is she at work on ?

CHRISTINE

Oh, well, I scarcely——

GARDNER

I know—"Hysteria in Lady Novelists."

MRS. PROUT

What?

GARDNER

[*to Christine*] Didn't you tell me so?

CHRISTINE

Of course I didn't, Doctor. What a shocking memory you have! It is worse than my spelling.

GARDNER

Then what did you say?

CHRISTINE

I said, "Generosity in Lady Novelists."

CURTAIN.

A Good Woman

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

JAMES BRETT (*a clerk in the War Office, 33*).

GERALD O'MARA (*a civil engineer, 24*).

ROSAMUND FIFE (*a spinster and a lecturer on cookery,
28*).

SCENE.—*Rosamund's Flat ; the drawing-room. The apartment is plainly furnished. There is a screen in the corner of the room furthest from the door.*

[*It is 9 a.m. Rosamund is seated alone at a table. She wears a neat travelling-dress, with a plain straw hat. Her gloves lie on a chair. A small portable desk full of papers is open before her. She gazes straight in front of her, smiling vaguely. With a start she recovers from her day-dreams, and rushing to the looking-glass, inspects her features therein. Then she looks at her watch*]

ROSAMUND

Three hours yet ! I'm a fool [*with decision*].

[*She sits down again, and idly picks up a paper out of the desk. The door opens, unceremoniously but quietly, and James enters. The two stare at each other, James wearing a conciliatory smile*]

ROSAMUND

You appalling creature !

JAMES

I couldn't help it, I simply couldn't help it.

ROSAMUND

Do you know this is the very height and summit of indelicacy ?

JAMES

I was obliged to come.

ROSAMUND

If I had any relations——

JAMES

Which you haven't.

ROSAMUND

I say *if* I had any relations——

JAMES

I say *which* you haven't.

ROSAMUND

Never mind, it is a safe rule for unattached women always to behave as if they had relations, especially female relations, whether they have any or not. My remark is, that if I had any relations they would be absolutely scandalised by this atrocious conduct of yours.

JAMES

What have I done ?

ROSAMUND

Can you ask ? Here are you, and here am I. We are to be married to-day at twelve o'clock. The ceremony has not taken place, and yet you are found on my premises. You must surely be aware that on the day of the wedding the parties—yes, the “ parties,”

that is the word—should on no account see each other till they see each other in church.

JAMES

But since we are to be married at a registry office, does the rule apply?

ROSAMUND

Undoubtedly.

JAMES

Then I must apologise. My excuse is that I am not up in these minute details of circumspection; you see I have been married so seldom.

ROSAMUND

Evidently. [*A pause, during which James at last ventures to approach the middle of the room*] Now you must go back home, and we'll pretend we haven't seen each other.

JAMES

Never, Rosamund! That would be acting a lie. And I couldn't dream of getting married with a lie on my lips. It would be so unusual. No; we have sinned, or rather I have sinned, on this occasion. I will continue to sin—openly, brazenly. Come here, my dove. A bird in the hand is worth two under a bushel.

[*He assumes an attitude of entreaty, and, leaving her chair, Rosamund goes towards him. They exchange an ardent kiss*]

ROSAMUND

[*quietly submissive*] I'm awfully busy, you know, Jim.

JAMES

I will assist you in your little duties, dearest, and then I will accompany you to the sacred ed—— to the registry office. Now, what were you doing?

[*She sits down, and he puts a chair for himself close beside her*]

ROSAMUND

You are singularly unlike yourself this morning, dearest.

JAMES

Nervous tension, my angel. I should have deemed it impossible that an *employé* of the War Office could experience the marvellous and exquisite sensations now agitating my heart. But tell me, what are you doing with these papers?

ROSAMUND

Well, I was just going to look through them and see if they contained anything of a remarkable or valuable nature. You see, I hadn't anything to occupy myself with.

JAMES

Was 'oo bored, waiting for the timey-pimey to come?

ROSAMUND

[hands caressing] 'Iss, little pet was bored, she was. Was Mr. Pet lonely this morning? Couldn't he keep away from his little cooky-lecturer? He should see his little cooky-lecturer.

JAMES

And that reminds me, hadn't we better lunch in the train instead of at Willis's? That will give us more time?

ROSAMUND

Horrid greedy piggywiggy! Perhaps he will be satisfied if Mrs. Pet agrees to lunch both at Willis's and in the train?

JAMES

Yes. Only piggywiggy doesn't want to trespass on Mrs. Pet's good nature. Let piggywiggy look at the papers *[he takes up a paper from the desk]*.

ROSAMUND

[a little seriously] No, Jimmy. I don't think we'll go through them. Perhaps it wouldn't be wise. Just let's destroy them *[takes paper from his hand and drops it in desk]*.

JAMES

[sternly] When you have been the wife of a War Office clerk for a week you will know that papers ought never to be destroyed. Now I come to think, it is not only my right

but my duty to examine this secret *dossier*. Who knows—— [*takes up at random another document, which proves to be a postcard. Reads*] “Shall come to-morrow night. Thine, Gerald.”

ROSAMUND

[*after a startled shriek of consternation*]
There ! There ! You’ve done it, first time !
[*She begins to think, with knitted brows*]

JAMES

Does this highly suspicious postcard point to some—some episode in your past of which you have deemed it advisable to keep me in ignorance ? If so, I seek not to inquire. I forgive you—I take you, Rosamund, as you are !

ROSAMUND

[*reflective, not heeding his remark*] I had absolutely forgotten the whole affair, absolutely [*smiles a little*]. [*aside*] Suppose he should come ! [*to James*] Jim, I think I had better tell you all about Gerald. It will interest you. Besides, there is no knowing what may happen.

JAMES

As I have said, I seek not to inquire. [*stiffly*] Nor do I imagine that this matter, probably some childish entanglement, would interest me.

ROSAMUND

Oh, wouldn’t it ! Jim, don’t be absurd.

You know perfectly well you are dying to hear.

JAMES

Very well, save my life, then, at the least expense of words. To begin with, who is this Gerald—"thine," thine own Gerald?

ROSAMUND

Don't you remember Gerald O'Mara? You met him at the Stokes's, I feel sure. You know—the young engineer.

JAMES

Oh! *That* ass!

ROSAMUND

He isn't an ass. He's a very nice boy.

JAMES

For the sake of argument and dispatch, agreed! Went out to Cyprus or somewhere, didn't he, to build a bridge, or make a dock, or dig a well, or something of that kind?

ROSAMUND

[*nodding*] Now listen, I'll tell you *all* about it. [*settles herself for a long narration*] Four years ago poor, dear Gerald was madly in love with me. He was twenty and I was twenty-four. Keep calm—I felt like his aunt. Don't forget I was awfully pretty in those days. Well, he was so tremendously in love that in order to keep him from destroying himself—of course, I knew he was going out to Cyprus—I sort of pretended to be sympa

thetic. I simply *had* to ; Irishmen are so passionate. And he was very nice. And I barely knew you then. Well, the time approached for him to leave for Cyprus, and two days before the ship sailed he sent me that very postcard that by pure chance you picked up.

JAMES

He should have written a letter.

ROSAMUND

Ah ! I expect he couldn't wait. He was so impulsive. Well, on the night before he left England he came here and proposed to me. I remember I was awfully tired and queer. I had been giving a lecture in the afternoon on "How to Pickle Pork," and the practical demonstration had been rather smelly. However, the proposal braced me up. It was the first I had had—that year. Well, I was so sorry for him that I couldn't say "No" outright. It would have been too brutal. He might have killed himself on the spot, and spoilt this carpet, which, by the way, was new then. So I said, "Look here, Gerald——"

JAMES

You called him "Gerald" ?

ROSAMUND

Rather ! "Look here, Gerald," I said ;
"you are going to Cyprus for four years. If

your feeling towards me is what you think it is, come back to me at the end of those four years, and I will then give you an answer." Of course I felt absolutely sure that in the intervening period he would fall in and out of love half a dozen times at least.

JAMES

Of course, half a dozen times at least; probably seven. What did he say in reply?

ROSAMUND

He agreed with all the seriousness in the world. "On this day four years hence," he said, standing just there [*pointing*], "I will return for your answer. And in the meantime I will live only for you." That was what he said—his very words.

JAMES

And a most touching speech, too! And then?

ROSAMUND

We shook hands, and he tore himself away, stifling a sob. Don't forget, he was a boy.

JAMES

Have the four years expired?

ROSAMUND

What is the date of that postcard? Let me see it [*snatches it, and smiles at the handwriting pensively*] July 4th—four years ago.

JAMES

Then it's over. He's not coming. To-day is July 5th.

ROSAMUND

But yesterday was Sunday. He wouldn't come on Sunday. He was always very particular and nice.

JAMES

Do you mean to imply that you think he will come to-day and demand from you an affirmative? A moment ago you gave me to understand that in your opinion he would have—er—other affairs to attend to.

ROSAMUND

Yes. I did think so at the time. But now—now I have a kind of idea that he may come, that after all he may have remained faithful. You know I was maddeningly pretty then, and he had my photograph.

JAMES

Tell me, have you corresponded?

ROSAMUND

No, I expressly forbade it.

JAMES

Ah!

ROSAMUND

But still, I have a premonition he may come.

JAMES

[*assuming a pugnacious pose*] If he does, I will attend to him.

ROSAMUND

Gerald was a terrible fighter.

[*A resounding knock is heard at the door. Both start violently, and look at each other in silence. Rosamund goes to the door and opens it*]

ROSAMUND

[*with an unsteady laugh of relief*] Only the postman with a letter [*she returns to her seat*] No, I don't expect he will come, really [*puts letter idly on table*].

[*Another knock still louder. Renewed start*]

ROSAMUND

Now that is he, I'm positive. He always knocked like that. Just fancy. After four years! Jim, just take the chair behind that screen for a bit. I *must* hide you.

JAMES

No, thanks! The screen dodge is a trifle *too* frayed at the edges.

ROSAMUND

Only for a minute. It would be *such* fun.

JAMES

No, thanks. [*Another knock*]

ROSAMUND

[*with forced sweetness*] Oh, very well, then. . . .

JAMES

Oh, well, of course, if you take it in that way——

[*He proceeds to a chair behind screen, which does not, however, hide him from the audience*]

ROSAMUND

[*smiles his reward*] I'll explain it all right.
[*loudly*] Come in !

Enter Gerald O'Mara.

GERALD

So you are in ! [*hastens across room to shake hands*]

ROSAMUND

Oh, yes, I am in. Gerald, how are you ? I must say you look tolerably well. [*they sit down*]

GERALD

Oh ! I'm pretty fit, thanks. Had the most amazing time in spite of the climate. And you ? Rosie, you haven't changed a little bit. How's the cookery trade getting along ? Are you still showing people how to concoct French dinners out of old bones and a sardine tin ?

ROSAMUND

Certainly. Only I can do it without the bones now. You see, the science has progressed while you've been stagnating in Cyprus.

GERALD

Stagnating is the word. You wouldn't believe that climate !

ROSAMUND

What ! Not had nice weather ? What a

shame ! I thought it was tremendously sunshiny in Cyprus.

GERALD

Yes, that's just what it is, 97° in the shade when it doesn't happen to be pouring with malarial rain. We started a little golf club at Nicosia, and laid out a nine-hole course. But the balls used to melt. So we had to alter the rules, keep the balls in an ice-box, and take a fresh one at every hole. Think of that !

ROSAMUND

My poor boy ! But I suppose there were compensations ? You referred to "an amazing time."

GERALD

Yes, there were compensations. And that reminds me, I want you to come out and lunch with me at the Savoy. I've got something awfully important to ask you. In fact, that's what I've come for.

ROSAMUND

Sorry I can't, Gerald. The fact is, I've got something awfully important on myself just about lunch time.

GERALD

Oh, yours can wait. Look here, I've ordered the lunch. I made sure you'd come. [*Rosamund shakes her head*] Why can't you ? It's not cooking, is it ?

ROSAMUND

Only a goose.

GERALD

What goose ?

ROSAMUND

Well—my own, and somebody else's. Listen, Gerald. Had you not better ask me this awfully important question now? No time like the present.

GERALD

I can always talk easier, especially on delicate topics, with a pint of something handy. But if you positively won't come, I'll get it off my chest now. The fact is, Rosie, I'm in love.

ROSAMUND

With whom ?

GERALD

Ah ! That's just what I want you to tell me.

ROSAMUND

[*suddenly starting*] Gerald ! what is that dreadful thing sticking out of your pocket, and pointing right *at* me ?

GERALD

That ? That's my revolver. Always carry them in Cyprus, you know. Plenty of sport there.

ROSAMUND

[*breathing again*] Kindly take it out of

your pocket and put it on the table. Then if it does go off, it will go off into something less valuable than a cookery-lecturer.

GERALD

[*laughingly obeying her*] There. If anything happens it will happen to the screen. Now, Rosie, I'm in love, and I desire that you should tell me whom I'm in love with. There's a magnificent girl in Cyprus, daughter of the Superintendent of Police——

ROSAMUND

Name ?

GERALD

Evelyn. Age nineteen. I tell you I was absolutely gone on her.

ROSAMUND

Symptoms ?

GERALD

Well—er—whenever her name was mentioned I blushed terrifically. Of course, that was only one symptom. . . . Then I met a girl on the home steamer—no father or mother. An orphan, you know, awfully interesting.

ROSAMUND

Name ?

GERALD

Madge. Nice name, isn't it ? [*Rosamund nods*] I don't mind telling you, I was considerably struck by her—still am, in fact.

ROSAMUND

Symptoms?

GERALD

Oh ! . . . Let me see, I never think of her without turning absolutely pale. I suppose it's what they call "pale with passion." Notice it?

ROSAMUND

[*somewhat coldly*] It seems to me the situation amounts to this. There are two girls. One is named Evelyn, and the thought of her makes you blush. The other is named Madge, and the thought of her makes you turn pale. You fancy yourself in love, and you wish me to decide for you whether it is Madge or Evelyn who agitates your breast the more deeply.

GERALD

That's not exactly the way to put it, Rosie. You take a fellow up too soon. Of course I must tell you lots more yet. You should hear Evelyn play the "Moonlight Sonata." It's the most marvellous thing. . . . And then Madge's eyes ! The way that girl can look at a fellow. . . . I'm telling you all these things, you know, Rosie, because I've always looked up to you as an elder sister.

ROSAMUND

[*after a pause, during which she gazes into his face*] I suppose it was in my character of

your elder sister, that you put a certain question to me four years ago last night ?

GERALD

[staggered ; pulls himself together for a great resolve ; after a long pause] Rosie ! I never thought afterwards you'd take it seriously. I forgot it all. I was only a boy then. *[speaking quicker and quicker]* But I see clearly now. I never *could* withstand you. It's all rot about Evelyn and Madge. It's you I'm in love with ; and I never guessed it ! Rosie ! . . . *[Rushes to her and impetuously flings his arms around her neck.]*

JAMES

[who, during the foregoing scene, has been full of uneasy gestures ; leaping with incredible swiftness from the shelter of the screen] Sir !

ROSAMUND

[pushing Gerald quietly away] Gerald !

JAMES

May I inquire, sir, what is the precise significance of this attitudinising ? *[Gerald has scarcely yet abandoned his amorous pose, but now does so quickly.]* Are we in the middle of a scene from "Romeo and Juliet," or is this 9.30 a.m. in the nineteenth century ? If Miss Fife had played the "Moonlight Sonata" to you, or looked at you as Madge does, there might perhaps have been some shadow of an excuse for your extraordinary and infamous conduct.

But since she has performed neither of these feats of skill, I fail to grasp—I say I fail to grasp—er——

GERALD

[slowly recovering from an amazement which has rendered him mute] Rosie, a man concealed in your apartment! But perhaps it is the piano-tuner. I am willing to believe the best.

ROSAMUND

Let me introduce Mr. James Brett, my future husband. Jim, this is Gerald.

JAMES

I have gathered as much. *[the men bow stiffly]*

ROSAMUND

[dreamily] Poor, poor Gerald!

[Her tone is full of feeling. James is evidently deeply affected by it. He walks calmly and steadily to the table and picks up the revolver]

GERALD

Sir, that tool is mine.

JAMES

Sir, the fact remains that it is an engine of destruction, and that I intend to use it. Rosamund, the tone in which you uttered those three words, "Poor, poor Gerald!" convinces me, a keen observer of symptoms, that I no longer possess your love. Without

your love, life to me is meaningless. I object to anything meaningless—even a word. I shall therefore venture to deprive myself of life. Goodbye ! [*To Gerald.*] Sir, I may see you later. [*raises the revolver to his temples*]

ROSAMUND

[*appealing to Gerald to interfere*] Gerald !

GERALD

Mr. Brett, I repeat that that revolver is mine. It would be a serious breach of good manners if you used it without my consent, a social solecism of which I believe you, as a friend of Miss Fife's, to be absolutely incapable. Still, as the instrument happens to be in your hand, you may use it—but not on yourself. Have the goodness, sir, to aim at me. I could not permit myself to stand in the way of another's happiness, as I should do if I continued to exist. At the same time I have conscientious objections to suicide. You will therefore do me a service by aiming straight. Above all things, don't hit Miss Fife. I merely mention it because I perceive that you are unaccustomed to the use of firearms. [*folds his arms*]

JAMES

Rosamund, *do* you love me ?

ROSAMUND

My Jim !

JAMES

[*deeply moved*] The possessive pronoun convinces me that you do. [*smiling blandly*] Sir, I will grant your most reasonable demand. [*aims at Gerald*]

ROSAMUND

[*half shrieking*] I don't love you if you shoot Gerald.

JAMES

But, my dear, this is irrational. He has asked me to shoot him, and I have as good as promised to do so.

ROSAMUND

[*entreating*] James, in two hours we are to be married. Think of the complications.

GERALD

Married! To-day! Then I withdraw my request.

JAMES

Yes; perhaps it will be as well. [*lowers revolver*]

GERALD

I have never yet knowingly asked a friend, even an acquaintance, to shoot me on his wedding-day, and I will not begin now. Moreover, now I come to think of it, the revolver wasn't loaded. Mr. Brett, I inadvertently put you in a ridiculous position. I apologise.

JAMES

I accept the apology.

[*The general tension slackens. Both the men begin to whistle gently, in the effort after unconcern*]

ROSAMUND

Jim, will you oblige me by putting that revolver down somewhere. I know it isn't loaded ; but so many people have been killed by guns that weren't loaded that I should feel safer . . . [*he puts it down on the table*]
Thank you !

JAMES

[*picking up letter*] By the way, here's that letter that came just now. Aren't you going to open it? The writing seems to me to be something like Lottie Dickinson's.

ROSAMUND

[*taking the letter*] It isn't Lottie's ; it's her sister's. [*stares at envelope*] I know what it is. I *know* what it is. Lottie is ill, or dead, or something, and can't come and be a witness at the wedding. I'm sure it's that. Now, if she's dead we can't *be* married to-day ; it wouldn't be decent. And it's frightfully unlucky to have a wedding postponed. Oh, but there isn't a black border on the envelope, so she can't be *dead*. And yet perhaps it was so sudden they hadn't time to

buy mourning stationery ! This is the result of your coming here this morning. I felt sure something would happen. Didn't I tell you so ?

JAMES

No, you didn't, my dear. But why don't you open the letter ?

ROSAMUND

I *am* opening it as fast as I can. [*reads it hurriedly*] There ! I said so ! Lottie fell off her bicycle last night, and broke her ankle—won't be able to stir for a fortnight—in great pain—hopes it won't *inconvenience* us !

JAMES

Inconvenience ! I must say I regard it as very thoughtless of Lottie to go bicycling the very night before our wedding. Where did she fall off ?

ROSAMUND

Sloane Street.

JAMES

That makes it positively criminal. She always falls off in Sloane Street. She makes a regular practice of it. I have noticed it before.

ROSAMUND

Perhaps she did it on purpose.

JAMES

Not a doubt of it !

ROSAMUND

She doesn't want us to get married !

JAMES

I have sometimes suspected that she had a certain tenderness for me [*endeavouring to look meek*].

ROSAMUND

The cat !

JAMES

By no means. Cats are never sympathetic. She is. Let us be just before we are jealous.

ROSAMUND

Jealous ! My dear James ! Have you noticed how her skirts hang ?

JAMES

Hang her skirts !

ROSAMUND

You wish to defend her ?

JAMES

On the contrary ; it was I who first accused her.

[*Gerald, to avoid the approaching storm, seeks the shelter of the screen, sits down, and taking some paper from his pocket begins thoughtfully to write*]

ROSAMUND

My dear James, let me advise you to keep quite, quite calm. You are a little bit upset.

JAMES

I am a perfect cucumber. But I can hear your breathing.

ROSAMUND

If you are a cucumber, you are a very indelicate cucumber. I'm not breathing more than is necessary to sustain life.

JAMES

Yes, you are ; and what's more you'll cry in a minute if you don't take care. You're getting worked up.

ROSAMUND

No, I shan't. [*sits down and cries*]

JAMES

What did I tell you ? Now perhaps you will inform me what we are quarrelling about, because I haven't the least idea.

ROSAMUND

[*through her sobs*] I do think it's horrid of Lottie. We can't be married with one witness. And I didn't want to be married at a registry office at all.

JAMES

My pet, we can easily get another witness. As for the registry office, it was yourself who proposed it, as a way out of a difficulty. I'm High and you're Low——

ROSAMUND

I'm not Low ; I'm Broad, or else Evangelical.

JAMES

[*beginning calmly again*] I'm High and you're Broad, and there was a serious question about candles and a genuflection, and so we decided on the registry office, which, after all, is much cheaper.

ROSAMUND

[*drying her tears, and putting on a saintly expression*] Well, anyhow, James, we will consider our engagement at an end.

JAMES

This extraordinary tiff has lasted long enough, Rosie. Come and be kissed.

ROSAMUND

[*with increased saintliness*] You mistake me, James. I am not quarrelling. I am not angry.

JAMES

Then you have ceased to love me?

ROSAMUND

I adore you passionately. But we can never marry. Do you not perceive the warnings against such a course? First of all you come here — drawn by some mysterious, sinister impulse—in breach of all etiquette. That was a Sign.

JAMES

A sign of what?

ROSAMUND

Evil. Then you find that postcard, to remind me of a forgotten episode.

JAMES

Damn the postcard ! I wish I'd never picked it up.

ROSAMUND

Hush ! Then comes this letter about Lottie.

JAMES

Damn that too !

ROSAMUND

[*sighs*] Then Gerald arrives.

JAMES

Damn him too ! By the way, where is he ?

GERALD

[*coming out from behind the screen*] Sir, if you want to influence my future state by means of a blasphemous expletive, let me beg you to do it when ladies are not present. There are certain prayers which should only be uttered in the smoking-room.

[*The two men stab each other with their eyes*]

JAMES

I respectfully maintain, Mr. O'Mara, that you had no business to call on my future wife within three hours of her wedding, and throw her into such a condition of alarm and unrest that she doesn't know whether she is going to get married or not.

GERALD

Sir ! How in the name of Heaven was I to guess——

ROSAMUND

[*rising, with an imperative gesture*] Stop! Sit down, both. James [*who hesitates*], this is the last request I shall ever make of you. [*he sits*]. Let me speak. Long ago, from a mistaken motive of kindness, I gave this poor boy [*pointing to Gerald*] to understand that I loved him; that at any rate I should love him in time. Supported by that assurance, he existed for four years through the climatic terrors of a distant isle. I, pampered with all the superfluities of civilisation, forgot this noble youth in his exile. I fell selfishly in love. I promised to marry . . . while he, with nothing to assuage the rigours—

JAMES

Pardon me, there was Evelyn's "Moonlight Sonata," not to mention Madge's eyes.

ROSAMUND

You jest, James, but the jest is untimely. Has he not himself said that these doubtless excellent young women were in fact nothing to him, that it was *my* image which he kept steadfastly in his heart?

GERALD

Ye—es, of course, Rosie.

ROSAMUND

[*chiefly to James*] The sight of this poor youth fills me with sorrow and compunction

and shame. For it reminds me that four years ago I lied to him.

GERALD

It was awfully good of you, you know.

ROSAMUND

That is beside the point. At an earlier period of this unhappy morning, James, you asseverated that you could not dream of getting married with a lie on your lips. Neither can I. James, I love you to madness [*takes his inert hand, shakes it, and drops it again*]. Goodbye, James! Henceforth we shall be strangers. My duty is towards Gerald.

GERALD

But if you love *him* . . . ?

ROSAMUND

With a good woman, conscience comes first, love second. In time I shall learn to love *you*. I was always quick at lessons. Gerald, take me. It is the only way by which I can purge my lips of the lie uttered four years ago [*puls her hands on Gerald's shoulders*].

JAMES

In about three-quarters of an hour you will regret this, Rosamund Fife.

ROSAMUND

One never regrets a good action.

GERALD

Oh ! well ! I say . . . [*inarticulate with embarrassment*]

ROSAMUND

[*after a pause*] James we are waiting.

JAMES

What for?

ROSAMUND

For you to go.

JAMES

Don't mind me. You forget that I am in the War Office, and accustomed to surprising situations.

GERALD

Look here, Rosie. It's awfully good of you, and you're doing me a frightfully kind turn; but I can't accept it, you know. It wouldn't do. Kindness spoils my character.

JAMES

Yes, and think of the shock to the noble youth.

GERALD

I couldn't permit such a sacrifice.

ROSAMUND

To a good woman life should be one long sacrifice.

GERALD

Yes, that's all very well, and I tell you, Rosie, I'm awfully obliged to you. Of course I'm desperately in love with you. That goes without saying. But I also must sacrifice myself. The fact is . . . there's Madge . . .

ROSAMUND

Well ?

GERALD

Well, you know what a place a steamer is, especially in calm, warm weather. I'm afraid I've rather led her to expect. . . . The fact is, while you and Mr. Brett were having your little discussion just now, I employed the time in scribbling out a bit of a letter to her, and I rather fancy that I've struck one or two deuced good ideas in the proposal line. How's this for a novelty : " My dear Miss Madge, you cannot fail to have noticed from my behaviour in your presence that I admire you tremendously ? " Rather a neat beginning, eh ?

ROSAMUND

But you said you loved me.

GERALD

Oh, well, so I do. You see I only state that I "admire" her. All the same I feel I'm sort of bound to her, . . . you see how I'm fixed. I should much prefer, of course . . .

JAMES

To a good man life should be one long sacrifice.

GERALD

Exactly, sir.

ROSAMUND

[steading herself and approaching James]

Jim, my sacrifice is over. It was a terrible ordeal, and nothing but a strict sense of duty could have supported me through such a trying crisis. I am yours. Lead me to the altar. I trust Gerald may be happy with this person named Madge.

JAMES

The flame of your love has not faltered?

ROSAMUND

Ah, no!

JAMES

Well, if my own particular flame hadn' been fairly robust, the recent draughts might have knocked it about a bit. You have no more sacrifices in immediate view? . . .

[She looks at him in a certain marvellous way, and he suddenly swoops down and kisses her]

To the altar! March! Dash! we shall want another witness.

GERALD

Couldn't I serve?

ROSAMUND

You're sure it wouldn't be too much for your feelings?

GERALD

Pooh! I should enjoy it. . . . I mean I sha'n't mind very much. Let us therefore start. If we're too soon you can watch the process at work on others, and learn how to

comport yourselves. By the way, honeymoon?

JAMES

Paris. Charing Cross 1.30. Dine at Dover.

GERALD

Then you shall eat that lunch I have ordered at the Savoy.

ROSAMUND

Er— talking of lunch, as I'm hostess here, perhaps I should ask you men if you'd like a drink.

JAMES and GERALD

[*looking hopefully at each other*] Well, yes.

ROSAMUND

I have some beautiful lemonade.

JAMES and GERALD

[*still looking at each other, but with a different expression*] Oh, that will be delightful !

[*Lemonade and glasses produced*]

GERALD

I drink to the happy pair.

ROSAMUND

[*a little sinister*] And I—to Madge.

JAMES

And I—to a good woman—Mrs. Pet [*looking at her fixedly*]. All men like a good woman, but she shouldn't be too good—it's a strain on the system.

[General consumption of lemonade, the men bravely swallowing it down. Rosamund rests her head on James's shoulder]

ROSAMUND

It occurs to me, Gerald, you only ordered lunch for two at the Savoy.

GERALD

Well, that's right. By that time you and James, if I may call him so, will be one, and me makes two.

CURTAIN.

A Question of Sex

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS.

GEORGE GOWER (27).

FRANCIS GOWER (*his well-preserved bachelor uncle*).

MAY FOSTER (*his married sister, 25*).

HELEN STANTON (*his wife's married sister, 28*).

SCENE.—George Gower's drawing-room. Evening.

[George Gower is asleep in an easy-chair near the hearth. By his side is a fairly large occasional table, on which are some writing materials and an empty glass.]

Enter May Foster and Helen Stanton. They open the door quietly, and pause on the threshold to observe the sleeper. They are both in a pleased, gay mood of gentle excitation, but at first they speak low]

MAY

The wretch still sleeps.

HELEN

Yes. A man is a marvellous thing. Such talent in some directions.

MAY

Let's wake him now. I should think he'd had enough.

HELEN

Enough! Well. . . . It's turned seven, and he must have dropped off just after lunch. Five hours!

MAY

[smiling kindly at her unconscious brother]

Ah ! He hasn't slept much for the last few nights ; he's been so frightfully anxious.

HELEN

[raising her eyebrows] Anxious ! And what about his poor wife—what about Ada's anxiety ? How he *could* sleep like this when he knew *perfectly* well . . . *[lifts her hands, and finishes by smiling]*.

[The two young women approach George's chair on tiptoe, and indicate to each other by gestures that they will waken him in the orthodox way. Bending down, Helen sniffs at the empty glass]

HELEN

Um ! Whiskey. Naturally.

[She then bends to George's face to kiss him, but hesitates and looks at May]

HELEN

Perhaps it would be better if you did it, dear *[May quickly kisses him]*. The privileges of a sister-in-law vary in different families.

[George wakes up. May and Helen stand side by side facing him, their hands behind them, smiling, and full of mysteries]

GEORGE

[mechanically reaching out for the glass]
What did you say ? I do believe I dropped

off for a second or two [*finding glass empty*].

Dash ! What a thirst I've got on to-day !

HELEN

There !

GEORGE

Well ! What are you two staring at ?

How's Ada now ? Doctor come yet ?

MAY [*softly*]

George, it's a girl.

GEORGE

What's a girl ? Who's a girl ?

HELEN

It's a girl.

[*Pause, while the fact of his fatherhood dawns upon George.*]

GEORGE

[*starting up*] Well, I'm damned if this isn't the quickest thing of the kind that ever I heard of ! [*he makes a bound for the door*]

MAY

[*both the girls seizing him*] George, come back. You mustn't go to her. She's asleep [*soothing him, and trying to calm his sudden tremendous excitement*].

GEORGE

Well, I *am* damned ! Why, it can't be a quarter of an hour since I left her ! [*sinks back into chair*]

HELEN

George Gower, does it not occur to you that these terrible oaths are sadly, sadly out of place? Recollect that as a father you are considerably less than a day old. Blasphemy from lips so young is an instance of infant depravity, such as even I, a district visitor, have seldom seen surpassed. Our curate at Ealing has composed a special form of prayer for young parents. I have brought it over with me, and I shall ask you to—to make it your own. In the meantime I beg you not to disgrace the sacred name of father. Think of poor, dear Ada. Ah, my darling sister has behaved splendidly! Think of what she has been through!

GEORGE

That's just what I *am* thinking of, and the more I think the more I can't——

MAY

[*interrupting him*] Why, George, you silly, you've been asleep five hours, and——

GEORGE

I swear I haven't.

HELEN

No more swearing, I entreat. You *have* been asleep five hours. It's turned seven o'clock. Your daughter is some three hours old . . .

MAY

Yes, and everything went off beautifully. Ada cried a bit——

HELEN

Ada was simply superb.

MAY

Yes, she was, dear. She's asleep now, George. And the baby's the loveliest little thing——

HELEN

The doctor says he never saw a finer.

MAY

Yes, and nurse says so too. And she's got *lots* of hair.

HELEN

And cry— ! She's got lungs like bellows.

GEORGE

[*sitting up severely*] Why didn't you come and wake me up ? Answer me. For anything you knew, I might have been doing the most awful things to the sacred name of father during those three hours—and quite innocently. Helen, you at least . . . [*ends with a reproachful gesture*].

HELEN

Well, I did ask May to go down and sit with you.

MAY

[*to Helen*] But, dear, I couldn't have dreamt of leaving Ada.

HELEN

Why not, dear ? I came over specially from Ealing, and left my own little ones

and Ernest, in order to see after Ada myself.

MAY

And I came from Harrow, which is much further than Ealing. I haven't any little ones ; but if I had I should have left them, I'm sure I should [*plaintively*]. I left Jack and the two kittens, and there was nothing else to leave.

HELEN

But it is a question of experience, dear.

MAY

Well, I don't know, dear. It seems to me that common sense and a cool head are better than experience.

HELEN

But surely, dear, you don't suggest——
Oh ! [*suddenly forgetting this little passage of arms, and thinking of something important*]
We didn't—— [*whispers in Mary's ear*]

MAY

Gracious heavens ! Do you think nurse will remember ?

HELEN

Probably not. I have had three different nurses myself, and they're all alike. I'll just run up and see to it. [*George is mystified, as males are.*]

MAY

Oh, no ! I'll go, dear.

HELEN

Oh, no ! I'll go, dear. Where were the safety pins put ?

MAY

I know. I'll go.

HELEN

My dear, I really think . . .

GEORGE

If it's anything serious, hadn't you better both go ? Further delay might be fatal, and I should like to avoid being cut off in my infancy as a father.

HELEN

May shall go.

MAY

Not at all. I should much prefer Helen to go. She is *so* experienced.

[A pause ; and then Helen, pursing her lips, and looking as much like a martyred saint as she can, departs]

GEORGE

A girl ! *[sighs]*

MAY

George, what's the matter ? I thought all the time that you didn't receive our news with that ecstatic abandonment of joy which I believe is usual under the circumstances. Why aren't you glad and proud ? Why don't you weep happy tears of relief and content-

ment? Is it possible you are so lost to all parental feeling as to be indifferent when your wife presents you with a dear little darling baby?

GEORGE

May, you're a very decent sort, but if you say two more words in that strain, I'll go upstairs and I'll wring that kid's neck. I couldn't permit any child of mine to be niece to a woman who talked like that. Remember that as a father I have duties, responsibilities.

MAY

You're not well. I see it now. You're suffering. Of course it must be a great strain on the system to wake up and find yourself a father. George, forgive my hasty speech. You must take a little nourishment every quarter of an hour till the symptoms pass. [*she pats him gently on the cheek*] A great strain it was!

GEORGE

Strain! If you knew the strain I've been bearing for months past! Haven't you noticed the dark rings under my eyes, the unnatural brightness of my orbs, the hectic flush on my cheeks, the bald spot on the back of my head? Strain! . . . My dear sister, I have a secret and terrible woe—a woe which, with courage worthy of an

Englishman and a parent, I have shared with none. May, I am undone !

MAY

[*with accents of despairing sorrowful sympathy*] Who has undone you ?

GEORGE

My beloved wife, three hours since, as I slept. I feared it. I have feared it for many weeks. Listen. Five or six months ago, Uncle Francis said that if *it* was a son, he would settle ten thousand pounds upon *it*.

MAY

And if a daughter ?

GEORGE

He coldly declined to consider the possibility of such a thing. You know the special brand of ass he is sometimes. I said nothing to anybody, not even to my wife, for I felt that it would worry her. Imagine my condition of mind, my agonising suspense. Do you wonder that I have been wakeful night after night ? Do you wonder that, from pure weariness and fatigue, I should fall asleep on this very afternoon of my undoing ? Oh, May ! To be a father is not so simple and pleasing as the superficial observer might fancy.

MAY

[*sympathetically*] It certainly isn't, especially if you happen to be occupied with

being nephew to Uncle Francis at the same time.

GEORGE

Uncle Francis! Uncle donkey! Uncle nincompoop! Uncle booby! Uncle b——!

MAY

George!

GEORGE

Bachelor!—Pompous old bachelor. Upon my soul, to see the way bachelors behave themselves in these days makes me sick.

MAY

Don't forget you were a bachelor yourself less than a year ago.

GEORGE

Only in practice; not in theory, not in theory. I maintain that all bachelors are idiots. Look at Uncle Francis! There's a nice sample! . . . I believe the beggar knew it would be a girl all the time. But in any case, why couldn't he keep his precious plan of benevolence to himself till I was actually a father. Then, unless the sex of my child happened to please his fastidious taste, he need have said nothing; I should have been spared all this anxiety, and I should have been no worse off.

MAY

Well, George, it's a great pity, of course. I suppose he won't withdraw the condition?

GEORGE

[*sniffing*] Not he !

MAY

[*trying to be brave*] After all, you *are* no worse off ! Uncle hasn't robbed you of anything.

GEORGE

Oh, hasn't he ? I like that ! You aren't a father, May, and you can't enter into a father's feelings. Now what I feel is that he *has* robbed me. He's robbed me of precisely ten thousand pounds. Here am I, engaged in the arduous and expensive task of founding a family. I see ten thousand pounds within my grasp. The inhuman monster positively dangles it before me, and then, through no fault of mine—I repeat, through no fault of mine—it is snatched away.

MAY

[*caressing him*] Never mind, George. You're doing splendidly in your profession, you know you are, and you'll soon have got a large practice together, and made ten thousand pounds all of your own. Never mind.

GEORGE

But I do mind. I *will* mind. I won't be robbed. I absolutely decline to be jockeyed out of a large sum of money on a mere—a mere—a mere quibble of physiology. The

idea is revolting to my legal intellect. Something must be done, and done quickly.

MAY

I'm afraid it's a little late, George.

GEORGE

Rot! We must think of something—
instantly. Uncle Francis is certain to call
to-night. I wish he lived in the next hemi-
sphere instead of in the next street; that
would give us a chance. May, you must help
me; I rely on you.

MAY

But really, George, I don't see——

GEORGE.

I shall be sure to think of some scheme in
a minute or two. [*re-enter Helen*] Hush!
I sha'n't say anything to her. . . . Well, sweet
sister-in-law.

HELEN

[*delightedly to May*] That darling is per-
fectly marvellous. Nurse brought her up to
the light just now, and she blinked her eyes
like anything.

MAY

[*with equal delight and astonishment*] No!
Just fancy, George!

GEORGE

Yes. Imagine the intelligence involved in
that apparently simple act. That's what you
call "taking notice," I suppose?

HELEN

The little pet blinked her ridiculous little eyes several times.

GEORGE

About how many times?

HELEN

[*after looking at him*] I daresay you think you're very funny, George. . . .

MAY

[*instinctively coming to the rescue of the sex*] George, don't be silly. You've no notion of good taste.

GEORGE

Well, she called my daughter's eyes ridiculous. I don't think that was quite in the best taste, especially after an acquaintance of only three hours.

HELEN

[*to George*] Dear Ada is awake now, and she did say she would like to see you for a minute, but I doubt whether in your present mood—[*George is at the door in a second*] George! [*stopping him peremptorily*]

GEORGE

Well?

HELEN

[*going up to him, and putting a hand on his arm entreatingly*] Be good to her, George. And mind, you must only stay a minute or two. My dear [*to May*], you had better go

with him. We cannot be too careful. And I will just scribble a line to Ernest. [*sits down to write at table*]

MAY

[*to George*] Now, papa.

[*Exit George and May*]

HELEN

[*reading what she writes*] "My love. Just a word to let you know that all is well, and Ada has a little daughter, rather weak and puny, I fear, but we cannot expect all children to be as strong as ours. Ada was very brave, but it is fortunate I came, as no one seemed to have any idea of how to manage. May Foster is very kind-hearted, but so girlish. Shall return Thursday, if I can be spared. Love to the chicks. Don't forget what I told you about going to bed early. With fondest love from your little Nell. P.S. No time for more." [*folding up letter*]

Enter Francis Gower, with hat and stick.

FRANCIS

Good evening—er——

HELEN

Ah! Good evening [*getting up*]. I must introduce myself. I am Mrs. Ernest Stanton, George Gower's sister-in-law. You, I feel sure, are Mr. Francis Gower, George's uncle.

FRANCIS

[*shaking hands with assiduity*] Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Stanton. You knew me for a Gower at once, then?

HELEN

Yes, you have the unmistakable Gower eyes—wicked eyes—only more so. [*they sit down*]

FRANCIS

You flatter me.

HELEN

Flatter you, Mr. Gower? How so? When I see eyes like yours I always say to myself that their owner has ensured the happiness of some innocent and trusting woman——

FRANCIS

I beg pardon—I am not, er——

HELEN

By not marrying her.

FRANCIS

In that sense I may certainly claim to be the benefactor of your sex. When I review in my mind the vast phalanx of charming women whom I have *not* married, I——

HELEN

[*interrupting him drily*] Of course you want to know about Ada?

FRANCIS

Yes, I thought I would come round and

inquire before sitting down to dinner. I was given to understand that there was an expectation, a surmise, a suspicion that—er——

HELEN

Well, Mr. Gower, I have good news for you. Ada has a daughter.

FRANCIS

A daughter! How delightful! [*smiles to himself with secret joy*] You said a daughter?

HELEN

Yes. Just after three this afternoon. Rather an unusual hour.

FRANCIS

Indeed! Er—— Indeed! I fear I am quite at sea in the minute details of these matters. Are—are mother and child both doing well?

HELEN

Splendidly, splendidly. My sister has behaved admirably. [*during the foregoing conversation Helen has just put her letter in an envelope, and addressed it. She now goes to the mantelpiece and rings bell*]

FRANCIS

And the child—how did *it* behave?

HELEN

[*smiling cautiously*] Oh, well, Mr. Gower, as you say, you are rather at sea in these matters.

FRANCIS

It is so difficult to mould one's inquiries in quite the right form. Now, at funerals, I assure you, I am unimpeachable. I have often been told so. Question of practice, I suppose. It is a most singular thing to me, having regard to the alarming increase in our population, how many funerals there seem to be, and how few births. Perhaps that has not occurred to you, Mrs. Stanton?

HELEN

[*after ringing bell again*] Indeed not. Quite the opposite, in fact. Did you hear that bell ring?

FRANCIS

Distinctly.

HELEN

That is the fifth time I have rung it, at least. These events upset a household from attic to basement.

FRANCIS

[*mildly surprised*] So far? Can I be of any assistance to you?

HELEN

Oh no, thanks. I only want to get this letter posted. If you will excuse me one second.

[*He rises and opens door for her*]

FRANCIS

Of course George is in high spirits?

HELEN

[*going out*] Oh, yes. But he conceals his feelings. Men do, you know. They think it's manly. [*Exit*]

FRANCIS

Just so. Well, Mother Nature, you with the inscrutable ways—[*sits down*] you've saved me ten thousand pounds by this day's work. I reverence you. . . . You're a bit of the right sort. [*smiling with silent satisfaction*] I've got through safe this time, as it happens. But I must really cure myself of these fits of impulsive generosity. Now if it *had* been a boy, I suppose George would actually have expected me to fork out that ten thousand, and I suppose like a good-natured ass I should have done so.

[*The door bursts open, and George and May enter quickly*]

MAY

[*to George, as they enter*] Isn't she a pretty little thing?

[*The two perceive Uncle Francis and stop short*]

GEORGE

Yes, *he* is. [*with a tremendous portentous look at May, pulling himself together*] Hullo, Uncle Francis!

MAY

[*with a look at George appealing for instructions*] Good evening, uncle. Rather warm isn't it, for the time of year?

FRANCIS

You look rather warm, my dear May
[*shakes hands*].

GEORGE

Well, what's the news, uncle? [*shakes hands*] Been to the City?

FRANCIS

No. This is the first time I've been out to-day. I thought I'd just walk round before dinner to inquire.

GEORGE

To inquire? About what? Oh! Ah!
Yes, of course! You mean about Ada.
Well, uncle, I'm glad to say it's all right, isn't it, May?

MAY

Yes, it's absolutely all right.

GEORGE

Ada is doing well, and I am the father of a fine boy.

FRANCIS

[*imperturbable*] A boy!

GEORGE

Yes. Now come, uncle, bear up. I know it must be a blow to you. But, heavens! what's ten thousand pounds to a man of your

fortune? Why, it's less than a fiver to me, isn't it, May?

MAY

Yes, George, it is. I think it was noble of you, uncle, to offer that ten thousand pounds, though the actual parting with it, to a person of your economic mind, cannot fail to be agonising.

GEORGE

Yes, indeed. When I first heard that my child was a boy, I said: "I wish for uncle's sake it had been a girl." Didn't I, May?

MAY

You did, George. You were sitting in that chair, and I stood here, and you said: "I wish for uncle's sake it had been a girl." Those were the very words you used.

GEORGE

[*to Francis*] My sympathies went out instantly to you, uncle. You who will have to write me a cheque for ten thousand pounds this very night. Personally, I should prefer to consider your offer cancelled. But I feel convinced that you would never consent to such a course. You are a man of your word. You said you would settle ten thousand pounds upon my child if it was a boy. It is a boy, and you *will*.

FRANCIS

You're sure it's a boy?

GEORGE

[*aside to May*] Now, what the deuce——
[*to Francis*] “Sure it’s a boy” ! Well,
what do you take me for ?

FRANCIS

I take you for a father, suffering from some
nervous disorder.

GEORGE

You mean I’m a little excited. Well, isn’t
that natural ? You wait till you’re a father,
uncle—I bet you it’ll make you sit up. But
fancy you asking me if I’m sure my own
child is a boy !

MAY

Yes, fancy ! Uncle, you should be more
careful. To a man in George’s delicate con-
dition, so recently a father, anything in the
nature of a shock might easily bring about
the most serious results.

UNCLE

You are right, my dear little girl. Pardon
a rough old bachelor not accustomed to
the etiquette of paternity. I suppose you
haven’t yet decided on a name, or names, for
this marvellous infant ?

GEORGE

[*looking at May helplessly*] Well, er——

MAY

Dear Ada was saying only just now that
at any rate he must be named Francis.

Probably his name will be George Francis, but he will always be called Frankie, after you.

FRANCIS

My dear, I am deeply touched by this little mark of consideration.

GEORGE

Yes, uncle. Of course we aren't the sort of individuals that proclaim their private feelings from the house-tops [*Francis walks about and twists his moustache*], but we think a great deal of you—a great deal. We look up to you. We admire your notion of the duties and responsibilities of a great-uncle. We, er—— And perhaps you'd like to give me the cheque now, uncle, and then you won't forget it. [*Francis takes no heed*] [*aside to May*] If we can once get the cheque, he'll never stop it, you know, and we can undeceive him afterwards, and tell him it was a joke and all that sort of thing.

MAY

Er—[*goes up to Francis and puts her hands on his shoulders*]. You are a dear old thing ! [*She is just about to kiss him when door opens and Helen enters*]

GEORGE

[*suddenly frantic*] Helen, you'd better go upstairs ; they've been knocking on the ceiling like anything for the last five minutes. I believe they want something.

HELEN

[*quietly*] George, you've had too much whiskey. I've just come from dear Ada.

[*May has dropped her hands from Francis's shoulders and looks stonily at Helen*]

GEORGE

[*calmly desperate*] Helen, this is Uncle Francis. You haven't met before, I think.

HELEN

Oh, yes. We met a minute or two ago, and I was telling Mr. Gower what a fine little girl Ada has.

[*With a stifled shriek May sinks into a chair. George also sits down, lamentably sighing. Pause, in which only Helen is mystified*]

FRANCIS

Mrs. Stanton, as the head of the Gower family, I feel it my duty to apologise beforehand. You are about to witness what is known as a "scene"—that is, unless you would prefer to retire.

HELEN

Not in the least, I assure you.

FRANCIS

Not merely a "scene," but a "family scene"; which, I believe, is the most highly developed form of "scene" known to science.

HELEN

Pray, don't mention it. I am quite accustomed——. That is, short of bloodshed, I can stand anything. But I do think blood is horrid. [*sits down with pleasurable anticipation*]

FRANCIS

[*nodding suavely in acquiescence*] The preliminaries being settled, we may proceed. George, why have you been lying to me?

GEORGE

Lying to you, uncle?

MAY

Lying, uncle? [suddenly crosses over to Helen and they embrace, Helen sympathetically rising to the height of May's emotion. May then sits down again]

FRANCIS

I used the word.

GEORGE

[*forcing a laugh*] Oh, yes. I see what you mean. I see what you mean now. I see——

FRANCIS

What eyesight!

GEORGE

Well, I was just carried away by one of those sudden impulses that one has, you know. That was it, wasn't it, May?

MAY

Yes, George, that must have been it. The

sort of thing that comes over you, uncle, before you know where you are.

FRANCIS

Comes over *me*?

GEORGE

No, uncle, not you. You won't understand it, I'm afraid. You're too old. You've got past the age for impulse. It's a disease that comes somewhere between measles and gout. It only affects the younger generation.

FRANCIS

[*showing perhaps the slightest passing trace of heat*] I'm too old, am I? I belong to the older generation, I suppose [*with terrible cold sarcasm*]. Toothless gums, palsied limbs, doddering idiot, and so on. [*smiling calmly again, but distinctly very angry beneath the Arctic smile*] If you look as well as me at forty-two, sir, you'll be lucky—damned lucky.

HELEN

[*half to herself, enjoying it*] As Ernest often says, the band is beginning to play. I seem to hear the strains in the distance.

GEORGE

[*getting up*] Forty-two! . . . Uncle!

MAY

[*with shocked surprise*] Forty-two!

FRANCIS

Sit down, sir.

GEORGE

[*sitting down*] Well—you called me a liar, but it occurs to me I'm not the only——

FRANCIS

Yes, I do call you a liar—a liar from the basest, the most mercenary motives. You told me your child was a boy.

GEORGE

Tut, tut. A slip of the tongue. You exaggerate trifles. Besides, for anything I knew, my child *was* a boy. I admit I had been told it was a girl ; but you know what women are, uncle, especially at these times—absolutely unreliable. I was merely, as it were, hoping for the best.

FRANCIS

Have you not just returned from viewing the body ?

MAY

[*musingly*] Now we're at an inquest.

GEORGE

I saw a kind of vermilion blob, surrounded by woollen fabrics, and I was given to understand that what I beheld was a human nose. But before I could satisfy myself even on that minor point I was told to go, as Ada mustn't be excited.

HELEN

I hope you'll all acquit me of any desire to take part in this scene ; but do I gather,

Mr. Gower, that George has attempted to deceive you as to the—er—sex of his—er—offspring?

FRANCIS

You do gather, Mrs. Stanton ; you emphatically do gather.

HELEN

George, I'm surprised at you ; I really am. To think that your poor dear wife should have gone through what she *has* gone through this day—and you not satisfied ! George, I blush for you . . . Then you were ashamed of your daughter. You wanted a son : a son that you could train up in your own sinful habits of blasphemy, self-indulgence, and deceit ! All I can say is, I'm *glad*, profoundly glad, that it is a girl.

FRANCIS

Mrs. Stanton, so am I. You have a truly noble mind.

HELEN

[*continuing to George*] What could be the object of such a childish deception ? Even you must have foreseen that it couldn't last ; that there must come a time when the dreadful secret would reach your good, kind uncle's ears.

FRANCIS

I will tell you his object, Mrs. Stanton. As you may possibly have heard, I am an in-

clustrious and painstaking person. I work hard and live plainly, and by the exercise of those gifts which heaven has been pleased to grant to me, I have accumulated a fortune—some would call it a large fortune ; I merely call it a fortune. I daresay I am worth a hundred thousand pounds. Now you might imagine that, possessing this and a clear conscience, I am happy. But there is another and a darker side to the picture which I am endeavouring to paint, Mrs. Stanton. I am cursed, continually cursed, in spite of what George is pleased to consider my advanced age, with an impulse—the impulse of unrestrained generosity. [*George and May exchange a look heavy with meaning*] Acting under this impulse, about six months ago, when George imparted to me the information that—er—he, that Ada—when, I say, George imparted to me the information, I said : “ George, if your child is a boy, I will settle ten thousand on him.” You see boys are so helpless. A boy can’t marry a rich husband ; can’t make his own clothes ; can’t, if the worst comes to the worst, go out as mother’s help—that is why I said, “ *if it is a boy* I will settle ten thousand pounds on your child.” I was under no obligation to make the offer. I acted merely from impulse, the impulse of absurd generosity. And how does

George repay me? By lying to me, and, what is worse, getting his sister to lie to me. In order to obtain a paltry ten thousand pounds he is willing to stain his honour with a lie. Bah! You, Mrs. Stanton, with characteristic insight and common-sense, have at once put your finger on the most despicable aspect of this painful affair. The lie was useless, futile, silly.

[A slight pause ensues after this damning indictment]

HELEN

George, did your wife know of your uncle's offer?

GEORGE

No, I kept it from her. I thought it would worry her.

MAY

That's perfectly true, Helen. He said so to me himself.

HELEN

I do not approve of secrets between husband and wife. It would have been better if you had told dear Ada.

GEORGE

But what difference could it have made? Uncle only made the offer——

HELEN

One never knows . . . Ah! George!

FRANCIS

[*suddenly to May*] As for you, May, you have pained me beyond expression.

HELEN

[*interrupting with womanly tact*] Now as I have been dragged into this little—shall I say “difficulty”?—let me end it for you. I always think it is such a pity to allow a quarrel to grow ; one should stamp it out in the bud. George—and you, May—you must beg your uncle’s pardon. I am sure he will grant it.

FRANCIS

[*with Christian resignation*] Willingly.

GEORGE

Oh, very well then, if there is to be such a fuss about a mere nothing, a momentary forgetfulness, excusable I should have thought in a man suffering the first pangs of fatherhood, I beg pardon. I apologise. I grovel.

MAY

If uncle can take any pleasure in the self-abasement of a fellow-creature, and that fellow-creature a woman, I also grovel.

HELEN

[*brightly*] There, there ! That’s all right. Shake hands.

[*They shake hands with mutual forgiveness*]

HELEN

There ! It's all done with and forgotten. A little tact, I have invariably found, is all that is necessary in these affairs, and I'm sure I'm very glad to have been of assistance. And now, Uncle Francis—I may call you uncle ?—you will write out the cheque.

FRANCIS

The cheque ?

HELEN

[*calmly*] The cheque for ten thousand pounds.

FRANCIS

[*almost staggered, yet still imperturbable*]
The cheque for ten thou—— ! [*stops*]

HELEN

You surely are not going to withhold it—especially after George and May have apologised so prettily. You surely aren't going to cast a slur, as it were, upon my niece, and my poor dear sister who has behaved so splendidly to-day !

GEORGE

[*suddenly tumbling to the game*] You surely aren't going to——

MAY

My dear uncle, you surely aren't going to——

FRANCIS

[*after a pause*] George, is your child a boy or is it not ?

GEORGE

I'm informed that he isn't—that she isn't.

FRANCIS

Well, then, upon what possible ground can you claim my ten thousand pounds? Allow me to remark that I have not the slightest intention of parting with it.

HELEN

Mr. Gower, I am deeply disappointed in you. Common humanity alone—— [*breaks off*]

MAY

Uncle, you have pained me beyond expression.

[*Both the women begin to cry softly*]

GEORGE

[*looking to heaven*] My poor wife and innocent babe!

HELEN

Great wealth may be to its owner a blessing or a curse. Alas! I fear it is too often the latter. It hardens the heart, blunts the finer susceptibilities, and transforms into a fiend what under more favourable circumstances might have been a human being. I have noticed the same phenomena even in my own children when Ernest gives them sixpence.

FRANCIS

[*striving after dignity without self-conscious-*

ness] By Jove ! It's eight o'clock. I shall be late for dinner.

HELEN

Yes, that's it. Go — go — and consume dainties out of season, and drink expensive wines, while your own flesh-and-blood eat the bread of sorrow. Centre all your thoughts on yourself. Shut your eyes to the grief and suffering which surround you. Think only of the carnal appetite. There is the rich man all over !

MAY

Trample on us. Drag the Juggernaut of your gold across our defenceless bodies. What is the shriek of pain, the moan of anguish, to you, so long as your millions increase and multiply.

GEORGE

Now, Helen, you see my uncle, my so-called uncle, in his true colours !

[Francis gazes with longing at the door]

HELEN

I do, George. I do, and I cannot bear the sight. I will go to my poor sister who is to be robbed of ten thousand pounds for a mere — a mere indiscretion. I must try to comfort her as best I can. It will be a fearful shock to the poor thing. It might kill her, but of course she must be told.

GEORGE

True, the news may kill her, but, as you say, she must be told.

HELEN

I will do my best to comfort her—I cannot say more. We must hope for the best.

GEORGE

Ah! *Her* you *may* comfort, but who shall pour balm into the wound of my defenceless child, whose career is blasted, so to speak, before it has cut its first tooth?

HELEN

You may well ask, George. But you ask in vain. Wealth has no ear for the wail of an infant. Wealth is preoccupied with its dinner.

MAY

[*appealingly*] Uncle, are you quite, quite determined?

FRANCIS

[*coughing*] Yes, May, I fear I am. And I insist on being allowed to depart.

ALL THREE

Oh go, go. Do not let us keep you from your repast.

FRANCIS

[*moving to door*] Possibly—I say possibly—I may repeat my offer, if at some future time you, George—that is, Ada, should have a boy. I have noticed that some parents

have large families—families in which both sexes are represented. If so——

HELEN

Alas! a frail hope, a hope probably delusive! Our dear curate at Ealing has nine daughters . . .

GEORGE

[*with cold politeness*] I thank you, Uncle Francis, but I have no expectation of being able to avail myself of your offer. Helen, we must resign ourselves.

HELEN

We must.

MAY

Yes, yes.

HELEN

But do not let us bear spite; Mr. Gower, we freely forgive you. Personally, I shall pray for you.

MAY

Yes, uncle, we feel it our duty to forgive you, and dear Helen will pray for you.

HELEN

[*showing her forgiveness, and with a new idea in her head*] Before leaving, Mr. Gower, you must really come upstairs and see the baby. She's a charming little creature. [*aside to George while Francis is collecting his hat and stick*] If we could get him upstairs——
[*George comprehends that in the presence of*

maternity and infancy, his uncle may be less obdurate]

FRANCIS

[edging towards the door] I do not doubt it, but I would really prefer to be excused.

HELEN

But Ada said to me specially that you were to go up. She wants you dreadfully to see her baby, her first-born. You must feel how heavy the little dear is.

FRANCIS

I shall be charmed to—when it is a little bigger.

MAY

Surely you will not disappoint dear Ada! Surely you don't bear malice!

FRANCIS

I would rather . . .

GEORGE

[taking him by the arm] Come along, uncle, we'll all go.

HELEN

Yes, we'll accompany you. You needn't be afraid.

FRANCIS

[for the first time showing signs of losing his equanimity ; faintly] Not to-night. Some other time.

GEORGE

Oh, come on!

FRANCIS

[*holding back with all his strength*] George, I will not. The two great rules of my life are never to enter a sick-room, and never to handle babies. And you ask me to break them both at once.

HELEN

Oh stuff !

MAY

The man's shy, actually. Make him come, George.

FRANCIS

[*appealingly*] No, no, George, I entreat. I once handled a baby.

ALL THREE

Well ?

FRANCIS

I dropped it ! [*Consternation.*]

MAY

Did it die ?

FRANCIS

No, I have sometimes wished it had.

GEORGE

Who was it ?

FRANCIS

It was you, George, and your mother fainted.

GEORGE

Oh ! You dropped me, did you ? Was I injured for life, maimed, crippled ?

FRANCIS

Happily not.

GEORGE

A jolly good thing for you. I'll teach you to drop me and make my mother faint. Come on, now !

FRANCIS

Excuse me, I pray you to excuse me. [*to himself*] I'd give a good deal to be out of this.

HELEN

[*solemnly*] How much would you give ?

MAY

Would you give a lot ?

GEORGE

Would you give ten thousand pounds ?
[*almost shaking him.*]

Dramatic pause.

FRANCIS

[*faintly, but quite self-possessed again*] I feel it coming.

HELEN

What ?

FRANCIS

It. My impulse of extravagant generosity, my terrible charitableness. [*He makes an inarticulate noise*] There ! There !

MAY

Perhaps pen and ink would assuage the agony.

FRANCIS

Perhaps.

[They lead him to the table. He sits down and pulls cheque book out of his pocket. May hands him the pen. He begins to write]

HELEN

[reading over his shoulder] "Pay George Gower ten thousand pounds." . . . Now the signature.

FRANCIS

[pausing on the verge of the signature]
Understand! I don't have to see that baby till it's six months old, and I don't have to handle it till it's a year—no, *two* years old.

[George nods, all smiles. Francis signs with a flourish. Tears cheque out of book, and hands it to May. May hands it to George, who receives it in ecstatic silence. Francis heaves a profound sigh.]

CURTAIN.

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